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# Media literacy courses in faculties of communication in TRNC

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## Abstract

Developments in information technologies have changed the world and the way we create and use information. Due to these developments, flow of messages occupy daily life through media. In order to overcome the chaos of the messages, people are in need of acquiring critical thinking and self-expression in media environment. Children, as well as adults, are becoming a part of this phenomenon, and teachers need to know how to leverage these technologies to better educational systems. Media literacy, which is an ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms, has become a key subject for eliminating the harmful effects of media.

In this study, media literacy understanding in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus has been put forward and the programs of five Faculties of Communication on the island have been analysed in the light of media literacy and its importance. As a program initiative, media literacy presumes to go beyond fundamental theoretical communication courses by providing student-outcome that enables students to become active participants in an increasingly media-saturated society. In the paper, it is discussed that with improving the programs of Faculties of Communication, the graduates will have the opportunity to become the future teachers of media literacy in primary and secondary education.

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*Keywords:* Media literacy; program; communication.

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## 1. Introduction

The rapid developments in communication technologies in recent years have caused global message exchange between people and countries. The use and the effect of media in people's lives today, have increased compared to 1980's. Media, which constructs messages with embedded values, and disseminates these messages to a specific part of the public, take an important part in daily life. At the same time, each medium has different characteristics, strengths, and a unique 'language' of construction and media messages is produced for particular purposes by each medium. Today the range of media which is being used by non-professionals to communicate and express themselves, through the world of picture and 3G phones and home video editing software, is already greater than the total output of all the world's TV stations (Media Literacy Charter). This indicates how much people subjected to a bombardment of messages.

The embedded values of messages have made them to be analyzed and criticized before people accept them. As media and media messages can influence beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, and the democratic process, the messages are constructed rather produced or created by the ‘sources’ of messages in order to influence people. So, the messages from different medium are not unbiased, even the news programs.

Because of this one-way message flow from different mediums towards the society, people need to understand how media works and to feel comfortable questioning what they watch and read. They need a sense of who knows or owns what, and to what extent what you see is really what you get. And, very importantly, they need to become confident in using and exploiting the possibilities of new devices and media channels. That is why the Media Literacy Task Force came together to launch “A Charter for Media Literacy”: a Charter which celebrates using media, encourages understanding and questioning, while at the same time highlighting the importance of everyone, regardless of age, having access to technologies and skills that will enable them fully to get the most from the full range of media (European Commission, 2006).

The purpose of media literacy in schools is to gain an ability of a comprehension of some of the strange features, needs and problems of media, and to guide students towards independent critical analyses of the roles of the media in today’s and tomorrow’s societies and to enable them to notice the various unavoidable dangers of manipulation and bias through the media. Media literacy education began in 1970’s; with the emphasis of protecting children from the harmful effects of media. Later, media literacy moved to the understanding to focus on critical thinking.

Media education has developed first in Great Britain, Australia, Canada, South Africa, and the United States. Then, a growing interest has started in other developed countries, like Netherlands, Russia and Italy. Media literacy is often a stand alone credit course, as well as part of the English curricula in Great Britain. Influenced by the developments in the world, Australia has studies on media literacy, and first text books prepared during 1980’s and 1990’s. Media education is growing in the United States because of the increased emphasis on 21st century literacy, which now incorporates media and information literacy and emphasis on the social responsibilities of communication. Concrete courses and/or programs in media literacy continue to be developed in the United States.

In areas of Europe, media education has seen many different forms. Media education was introduced into the Finnish elementary curriculum in 1970 and into high schools in 1977. In Denmark, the Danish education bill gave recognition to media education in 1994 but it is still not an integrated part of the school. Germany had theoretical publications on media literacy in the 1970s and 80s, with a growing interest for media education inside and outside the educational system in the 1980s and 1990s. In the Netherlands media literacy was placed in the agenda by the Dutch government in 2006 as an important subject for the Dutch society (Wikiapedia, 2008).

In Turkey, the first steps for a ‘media literate society’ was made by The Turkish Ministry of National Education and Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTUK) for introducing media education into the high schools’ seven grade curriculum. Media literacy education first started in five primary schools selected arbitrary for testing purposes in 2006-2007 academic year. This course has been planned to be given as an elective course in the curriculum of 2007-2008 at all primary schools of seventh classes (İnceoğlu, 2007). The aim of media literacy courses in general, is to make students to value what is important for them, create their own media blog and to be selective among programs and channels.

In the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, besides local TV and radio channels, which do not possess advanced technologies, people prefer to watch international channels. The Supreme Council of Broadcasting is the only responsible body for controlling broadcasting, and functions on a technical level. There isn’t any initiative taken by authorities to discuss media literacy in the society. We can see this unawareness to media literacy, reflected also in communication education in universities, where there is no relevant courses of media literacy in their programs.

## **The Aim of the Study**

This paper will provide an overview of the current state of media literacy in TRNC higher education, specifically in the Faculties of Communication, and outline the importance of media literacy courses in higher education and its reflection on primary and secondary education. In this study, answers to the following questions have been sought;

1) Why media literacy in programs?

## 2) Why Media literacy in the Faculties of Communication?

### Method

This study is carried out through searching literature and review methods. The first aim of the study constituted through searching literature on this field from different sources and the information have been reconstructed. The second aim of the study is achieved through reviewing and comparing the programs of five Faculties of Communication in Eastern Mediteranian University, Near East University, Cyprus International University, European University of Lefke and Girne American University in TRNC.

### Findings

#### 1. Why media literacy in programs?

As Len Masterman states, “media education is both essential to the exercising of our democratic rights and a necessary safeguard against the worst excesses of media manipulation for political purposes. People encounter thousands of messages every day, most of which are from different medium, not from interaction with others. Especially internet and television take an important part in daily lives for most of the people.

Europeans, it is estimated, spend around 30 minutes each day reading but 2.3 hours a day watching TV/video/DVD. Some 70% of all European households with children have a PC, 33% of European households have broadband access, 94% of young Europeans (12-18) are internet users and 95% of the same category (12-18) also has their own mobile phone (European Commission, 2006).

According to a study by UNESCO in 2005, Turkey is the second country in the world watching TV on an average 3.5 hours per day. Turkey has directly passed to the audio-visual culture without completing the transition process from the oral to the written culture. As a result, the circulation of newspapers is quite low for a population of 75 million. Even though the population of the country has doubled since 1960, this rate has stood still (İnceoğlu, 2007). An other Research carried out by RTUK in 2005, a person spends, %19 watching TV, %33 sleeping, %33 working and %14 for other other activitie of his time in a year (Altun, 2008). At the same time, young people, in general, who have access to the Internet and other media more than before, do not necessarily possess the ethics and the intellectual skills to critically analyze and evaluate their relationship with these technologies or the information they encounter.

Media literacy is concerned with helping students develop an informal and critical understanding of the nature of mass media, the techniques used by them, and the impact of these techniques. More specifically, it is education that aims to increase the students’ understanding and enjoyment of how the media work, how they produce meaning, how they are organized, and how they construct reality. Media Literacy also aims to provide students with the ability to create media products (Center for Advanced Technology, 1997: from Zettl 1998).

From this definition, it is clear how important it is to have media literacy and all its positive aspects adopted in higher education programs. First of all, curricula-builders, scholars and academics in communication programs should see its potential benefits to society and their educational platforms, and understand the importance of media literacy courses which can further their understanding of and engagement with the media.

#### 2. Why Media Literacy in Communication Faculties?

While media saturation and information access is so easy, Faculties of Communication must re-evaluate their programs to see if the practical and theoretical teachings are properly satisfying the demands of the field. Departments now have the burden of teaching why the media works as it does, and its accompanying social significance and overarching civic role in democracy. Here is where media literacy finds its significance in

communication education (Mihailidis, 2005). As a pedagogical tool, media literacy enables students to be active participants in society through a deep engagement with media, as well as give them the opportunity to become the future teachers of media literacy in primary and secondary education.

In countries, where media literacy courses take place in curriculum, a question arises on ‘Who will teach the media literacy lessons?’ In some countries social science teachers teach these courses who doesn’t have enough skill and knowledge on media studies. Even though most of the social science teachers have pedagogical courses on teaching, it is not enough to teach media literacy, as it requires a specific training on subjects like main structures of media, historical backgrounds of media theories and effects of media. Program including media literacy in the faculties of communication will help students both in acquiring media knowledge and instruments to teach media literacy, preparing them for the important responsibilities that they will soon take and on the other hand, to be future media literacy teachers.

The programs of five faculties of communication have been reviewed to find out if any relevant courses are present with media literacy. It has been found that there aren’t any such courses offered in undergraduate programs. In two universities, media literacy courses are offered in the graduate programs. These courses include mostly theoretical aspects of media literacy, rather than visual and practical aspects, which is the crucial part of the course.

## Conclusion

This paper aims to show the importance of inclusion of media literacy in the faculties of communication programs in TRNC. This will reveal an ‘added-value’ of teaching future media practitioners how to engage with and understand their constant subjection to and interaction with media. At the same time, students will have the opportunity to actively and directly engage with media. The courses should include attention-drawing techniques, interpretations by different audiences, practical information and visual materials, more than theoretical information.

It is recommended in this paper that the faculties of communication should include media literacy courses, elective at the beginning, in order to integrate the course to the program, and compulsory in two years. There is a need for integration, to settle the course outline with practical and visual materials, and also to find lecturers specialist on media literacy. Secondly, cooperation with the faculties of education is needed in order to integrate pedagogical education with media literacy, in order to give an opportunity to the graduates to teach media literacy courses in primary and secondary schools in future.

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